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Gray Aria [English] (/en/story/185290/gray-aria-english/)

Hazo (/en/u/hazo/)

We don't know when, we don't know how, and we don't know why, but something, or someone, tried to wipe out humanity, and it almost succeeded.
That was centuries ago, and we know little about it.
We don't understand the world we live in. We don't know why the sky is always gray, nor what are those giants of steel. But we survived, and one day, be so during this generation or the next one, we will find the answers to all of our questions.

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Aria

We don't understand the world we inhabit.

This isn't a philosophical quote, nor a sophisticated attempt to seem profound, nor even a claim that I live a life too busy to be dull. When I say we don't understand this world… I mean it. We truly don't grasp it.

We gaze at that perpetually clouded sky and wonder if anything lies beyond. The scriptures say it's filled with stars, but like the gods those same texts speak of, few dare believe in them without seeing them first.

We are born in Olvej, taught mathematics, languages, and what little history there is. We learn to fight, then to work, and finally, we're released into the world to be "free." We don't see our

parents for years unless we pay an enormous sum. I don't object; resources here are precious, and traveling across the continent is costly.

At sixteen, they send us to Nelvo to work, crossing that vast, almost lifeless ocean where everything, except for the massive blue cruiser that transports us, is tinged in shades of gray.

Make no mistake; we're not slaves. This is… more voluntary. From a young age, they make sure we understand there really is no alternative. When the waves break behind us, we wonder if our generation will be the one to bring change, but we never hope for it.

Now… why do I say we don't understand this world? Why do I sound so grim? The answer lies with the metal giants.

"Aria, don't get distracted."

"Oh—sorry."

Those enormous pillars of steel, a kilometer in circumference, buried in the

ground with an unknown height and depth, towering above the highest gray clouds and stretching farther down than our ancient sensors can read.

When I place my hand against one and look up at the sky, it almost feels like I can sense the entire history of the old world beneath my fingertips. Scientists say they might be thousands of years old, maybe hundreds. I'd love to know precisely… when they were built, by whom, and for what purpose. We explore, and keep exploring, year after year, but we've yet to find anything that tells us why these pillars are here.

I press a button on the communicator on my chest, glancing up at the gray clouds.

"It's starting to rain…"

"Are you coming back yet?"

"No, there are some caves nearby. I think I'll check inside to avoid the rain."

“The transport will return to the Derim pillar in six hours. Make sure you’re back by then.”

“Yes, don’t worry.”

By the time the rain poured over the earth, I was already inside the cave. I set my backpack beside the emergency beacon and the anti-vision rod, taking off the neuro-spiritual helmet and letting it drop at my side. No point wearing it indoors—it’s uncomfortable, and we’re not directly exposed to Vera rays here.

"Ah…”

I exhale, watching the rain fall, and brush aside the same strand of hair that always falls over one eye when I take off the gear. Braids—my entire head is covered in thin, red braids. Hardly anyone has long or loose hair; products to maintain it are scarce, so only the wealthy can afford such luxuries. Simple workers like me save our shampoo for special

occasions or festivals.

"…"

I turn to look deeper into the cave, following protocol: light first. I turn on the flashlight; the dirt walls look the same as always… but I spot some concrete further in. Looks like I found ruins. I wonder if they've been explored…

In any case, I pick up the beacon and the anti-vision rod and prepare to step forward, into the dark with the faint sound of rain in the distance. I slip the beacon into my pocket, secure the flashlight to my collar, adjust the anti-vision rod's acceleration level… and then it begins.

It's not typical for it to start so quickly, but… but…

Ugh… seriously… I only went ten meters in; I barely had time to take in the first details, and… my head, it hurts…

I'd never entered a cave where the SSS hit so fast, almost immediately. My fingers tremble, cold shoots down my spine, and

an irrational sense of dread and emotional pain dims my resolve… I don't want to go on. I don't want to keep crossing this cave. Nothing good will come from this; I'm going to get trapped. I shouldn't play with this; so many must have died here… I'm terrified, my chest so heavy, so heavy. I think I hear voices, but maybe it's just me. What's happening with the air? Is it getting thicker? The light isn't working, or maybe it is. There's a ringing in my ears; I know they're talking about me. They're telling me to leave. They grip my shoulders, shoving me back, threatening to take me with them with each step. They don't fear me; they just hate me. They blame me; I should be in their place. I'm not welcome, I'm not welcome, I'm not welcome, I'm not welcome, I'm not welc—

"The…"

I snap out of it for just a fraction of a second, just as tears start gathering in my eyes. I grab the ether inhaler from the upper right pocket of my jacket. Inhale,

inhale, inhale… just three times. Each dose contains seven milligrams, so three times is 21… better, better…

I lean back against the rock, wiping my eyes with a handkerchief and catching my breath again. It's alright, no one here will harm me, and I'm not here to harm anyone. This is their place, and this is mine. As long as I remember that, I'll have no problem. I'm not sure when I dropped the flashlight, but I bend down to pick it up and examine the cave's depth. The dirt, the stones, and concrete walls further down. A hallway. The ceiling is concrete too. Forward, forward, forward. The SSS symptoms fade, but the air around me grows heavier.

Soul Stealing Syndrome. It affects anyone who nears an area with high Soul Consumption Factor readings. Distress, pain, sorrow, a flood of negative emotions, and, if left unchecked, soon death, usually by induced suicide.

So many mysteries, so much we don't know, yet we long to explore and

understand everything…

Who can blame us? We live atop the corpse of an advanced civilization that met its end. We're what remains, with only a vague grasp of what we face.

I reach the point where the walls stop being dirt and turn to artificial material. I doubt I'll be able to communicate much further, so…

"Aria to Otzar, Aria to Otzar."

"Is something wrong?"

"I'm entering a cave. The SCF levels are extremely high, and there was no beacon at the entrance."

"Derim is the least explored area in the western region, Aria. I understand your eagerness to leave your mark, but be careful. We don't know what you might encounter. Did you experience SSS?"

"Yes, right as I entered…"

"That's very soon."

"I'm going into a section made of construction material. I may lose

communication."

"Seems you found ruins. You're going in there, verifying the interior, placing the beacon, and returning to the pillar. Understood?"

"Yes, yes, I know…"

"Good luck, Aria."

A few steps further and… the light on my jacket communicator shifts from blue to red, indicating the signal loss. Well, from here on, I'm completely alone. Just like them.

I walk, walk, keep advancing… getting close enough to the far wall to see it's actually a corner, and the hall turns right just up ahead.

I have a bad feeling… I'm fairly certain the cave didn't seem large enough from the outside to have complex passageways and such, so…

Yes, when I peer around the corner to see what lies beyond, I find a metal staircase, clanging with every step I take.

Clank, clank, clank, clank, clank. My footsteps resonate loudly, and though there's no echo, I feel they linger in the space. I can see what my flashlight illuminates further down, and it only heightens my concern and confusion.

It's a double-door of steel. Large, not massive, but more than the height of a standard door. I stand before it and then look behind me. Nothing, no inscription, no sign, no clue whatsoever, only the stairs, the earth, and… and before me, the door and its rust.

"Flashlight… charged. Inhaler refilled. Anti-vision rod in ideal condition. My state… SSS symptoms suppressed by ether. Please let there be nothing on the other side, nothing on the other side, nothing on the other side…"

It's funny, but all those urges to make a mark by being the first to find ruins or some lost artifact vanish the moment the risks become real. Right now, I only wish

to find a dead-end passage, to go back without taking anything, leaving only a beacon. I'll get paid a fair amount for the discovery and return without doing anything significant. But that's not what's going to happen.

No handle, so I simply push the doors open with my hands, and to my surprise, they swing wide without much resistance. And on the other side…

"Ah…!"

There's a body—a skeleton that has somehow resisted the passage of centuries without turning to dust. It still has bits of clothing, so I can easily tell it must have belonged to some kind of security guard. Sitting there, back against the wall, with an old device beside it, it seems frozen in time. I don't stop to take it all in, though —there's something more pressing.

"No, no…"

I scan the room. It's not a large space. There are remnants of furniture—desks, maybe—and traces of ancient technology along the walls and ceiling lights. It looks like… a sort of reception area. There are other doors farther down, each with a scanner of some kind, as though some sort of clearance was once required to pass. Strange.

"This guard… was alone."

I force myself to shed any emotions—pity, fear, even sorrow. Such feelings only draw them closer. Lifting the anti-vision rod by its grip, I position it in front of me. It's a robust polymer rod encased in transparent steel. I may not understand its inner mechanics, but I know how to use it. Yes, I know exactly what I need to do.

I press the blue button with my thumb, and the machinery hums to life. Inside the rod, something begins to spin at an unimaginable speed, needing a bit of effort to stabilize at first but soon becoming

barely noticeable. Finally, tiny lights flicker along the length of the rod, vibrating at a frequency that brings them to life. When these lights emit across the room in a soft 360-degree glow… the visions appear.

"…"

I knew it. This place, this room, the way the skeleton guarded the doors… there couldn't *not* have been a vision here. The guard, or rather his vision, stands beside his own body, staring at his remains. The flickering red lights of the anti-vision rod outline his silhouette faintly. I don't want to fight him; I don't enjoy dealing with visions. I'll just… move around him, ignore him. He doesn't seem to notice my presence, thanks to the ether and my concentration. I'll choose a door and explore a bit further. At least I've confirmed this place was still active up until the time of the Separation.

I pass him, close enough that we might as well have brushed against each other.

Not that I could sense it. You don't feel visions unless they reach out to you. The only thing one feels from them is the Soul Stealing Syndrome, the SSS.

A vision is a soul—a being, the essence of someone who perished in the Separation and remained tied to this world. It's estimated that over eight billion visions have been observed across the planet in the last 200 years. Now, there are far more visions than living people, though we have no way to know how many inhabit the Earth. When lit by the anti-vision rod, they appear… hollow. Humanoid shapes with barely discernible features, wrapped in a grayish shroud that looks as if there's nothing beneath it. Without the effects of ether, merely gazing into a vision's eyes is enough to send someone into the deepest stages of SSS.

I choose the left door, and it opens effortlessly. But as I cross the threshold—

"Oh, the light…"

My flashlight goes out. I didn't even get a chance to see what's inside.

"That's odd. I know it's charged. All my equipment gets checked before missions…"

I give it a few taps, but nothing. This has never happened to me before. Without much thought, I raise the anti-vision rod again, casting tiny red dots around the room, but—

"...! A-ah…"

Visions. So many of them. More than I've ever seen. Hundreds, maybe even thousands. They move in and out of the walls in a room I can hardly make out. I can barely glimpse the high ceiling through the red dots. There are so many; they cover every inch of visible space. I need to leave. I need to get out. There are far too many. I'm afraid. No, not just

afraid—I'm utterly terrified. My chest burns. I… I want to cry. Am I sad? I want to scream. Why? Why did this have to happen? Who did we wrong? I'm… I'm crying, but I can't stop staring at the visions. They're crying too, even more than I am. I can feel their suffering. They can't bear it any longer; they have no distraction from their pain. I want to collapse, hold myself. I wish someone would come and save me. Help. Help! I'm alone! Completely alone!! GET ME OUT OF HERE!! I NEVER WANTED ANY OF THIS!!

. . .

One—one of the visions turned toward me. It's approaching. Its ghostly steps make no sound. I don't know when it happened, but I find myself sitting on the ground, hugging my knees, my face soaked with tears. Ah… I must have fallen under SSS. The SCF must be so high here that even the inhaled ether can't keep the symptoms at bay. I feel terrible. I

shouldn't, I really shouldn't… but I grab the inhaler again and use it three more times.

The vision stops in front of me. It's tall, almost two meters, staring at me intensely… but it doesn't attack. I think the ether worked, but now I'm in a state of overdose. This means if I stay here too long, the ether will actually have the opposite effect and bring about my end.

The vision can't see me anymore, but it remains right in front of me. I stand, wipe my tears with one hand, and, gripping the anti-vision rod, I thrust it through the specter in front of me. The vision simply fades from reach of the red lights. This is what we consider the death of a vision, though we can't be sure. I walk, crossing the room that can't be fully explored, stabbing each vision blocking my way. The others don't react at all. No, they only respond to emotion, and right now, I'm operating like a machine. I despise the ether overdose. I feel… inhuman…

Finally, I reach a wall, but even on either

side of it, I see only endless visions. I must have walked… hm… perhaps a hundred meters. Does it still count as a "room" with such massive dimensions? I sigh in artificial frustration, and as I turn left, two things happen at once. Something touches my foot, and my flashlight flickers back to life.

"...impossible…"

Corpses. Hundreds of them. All packed into a bland, massive chamber with no exits, only some small air vents. Nothing here—absolutely nothing but skeletons. Large ones, small ones, medium ones. Clothes are draped over the bones, along with backpacks and the like. I feel neither alarm nor surprise. I can't—the ether won't let me. Looking down, I realize what I'd nudged with my foot was another skeleton. This one wears the same uniform as the guard by the door; he must have been his comrade. I crouch beside him.

"This… yes, it's the same device the other guard had outside. From its shape… I think it's a weapon. Ah, right. It's a gun. According to our ancient history classes, people relied on gunpowder weapons during the Separation. This must be one of them… Well, it's a valuable artifact. I'll take it. Ah, I left my bag at the cave entrance. Fine, I'll just stash it in my jacket…"

Without a doubt, this discovery will leave a huge mark on the records, and I may well be rich by the end of this mission. I should try to understand a little more about this place before leaving. Security guards, all types of people, all gathered in a concrete structure… a bunker? A shelter? That sounds logical.

I walk on, passing hundreds or maybe thousands of interesting and valuable artifacts I could collect, almost all among the clothing of the skeletons, of course. There's a lot of ancient tech here, but none of it is useful to us. We don't even have a way to access these old devices; all that

knowledge was lost in the Separation. I come across more guards. And… this one is different. Oh… oh! This is a big find! It's a data storage device. Not the analog kind we usually find on expeditions, those we can't access. This is an acrylic-engraved plate. We use laser-engraved acrylic as our main data storage format. This means that this technology is far older than I imagined. Incredible, truly incredible.

I don't hesitate to pocket the plate.

"Well… I don't think I'll find anything better than this. I should place the beacon and leave."

Ah…

What an incredible discovery. Without a doubt, this will make waves everywhere. When was the last time anyone found a shelter from the Separation? I don't know! But I'm sure it was ages ago. And there's so much left unexplored in this cave, and if new expeditions reveal even more amazing things, my name will only rise higher. And

besides! I have this acrylic plate that belonged to none other than a guard! Who knows what secrets about the Separation it could reveal!

The Separation—that's what we call the event that nearly wiped out humanity. We don't know the details, but one thing is clear: souls were torn from their bodies, like seeds taken from a peach without breaking the skin. Everyone died instantly, yet none of their souls left this world. They still haunt the places where they perished, trapped as visions, without purpose, without destination, simply existing for the sake of existing. What a terrible end. As for those who survived the Separation and why they did, there are many theories but nothing certain. The only solid fact is that all the survivors were children, so it's likely that had something to do with it.

"But it's strange… the Separation also took an enormous number of children, so what factor could it have been…? No, it doesn't matter right now."

As I make my way back to the exit, a smile on my face, I can only think about the renown and the wealth this beacon will bring once I place it at the entrance and give this cave the name of my choice. Maybe I'll even earn enough to visit Olvej and see my parents. Yes, that would be nice. But what should I call the cave? Hm… I've never been good at this, maybe something like…

"Wait…"

A smile?

"…"

My left hand reaches my face, fingertips grazing the corners of my lips. Yes, I'm smiling. But I shouldn't be able to smile; I'm under an ether overdose, which can only mean…

At that exact moment, an overwhelming surge of fear hits my chest like a hammer.

I've stayed too long, and now the ether is working against me. While I won't experience SSS, my emotions will flare uncontrollably. And as a result…

"…"

The visions have turned to look at me—all of them! I run; it's all I can do. Even if the anti-vision rod can dispatch a specter with one blow, there's no way I can face all these visions alone. I run frantically, cutting down one vision with each step. They're not fast—actually, they're very slow—but there are too many of them. Anyway, this overwhelming terror I feel is more a product of the ether overdose than of any real mortal danger, as I'm only ten steps from the door.

And like that, after taking down around six more specters, I kick open the door, finally escaping that death-scented refuge and returning to the reception area.

Visions don't tend to pursue anyone very far; they rarely stray from the place they

died. And no, we still don't know why they do this. There's so, so much we don't understand yet…

"…?"

There was… there was another vision here before. Yes, the guard lying on the floor. But it's gone now. Maybe… yes, it was likely drawn to my emotions and tried to capture me. I must have taken it down as well.

"Well, that makes my escape easier…"

Since I'm no longer in danger, I decide to take a short, much-needed break. Yes, I can now feel the side effects of the ether overdose quite clearly. My hands shake, and I can shift my mood entirely just by focusing on one thought or another. It's an uncomfortable emotional instability, like being on a dark rollercoaster, with falls all the more jarring because you can't see them coming.

I lean down to inspect the guard's body, but there's nothing of value aside from the weapon. I'm not planning to carry two anyway; it's always good to leave something for the next explorers to come across. That way, they can say something like, "Oh, I went on an excursion to the cave discovered by Aria and found this artifact that brought me wealth; that girl made a great discovery." Yes, yes, it's a good idea to leave a little for the scavengers.

"All right, nothing left to do here."

I turn to leave. And as I pass through the double doors leading to the stairs, the missing vision is there waiting for me.

Literally waiting, sitting on the third step, watching me intently.

Fear—a paralyzing dread locks my joints. Even with the overdose, the vision should be attacking me, but… it doesn't. It only stares, focusing on my anti-vision rod, still active, as if to say, "Are you going

to kill me with that?" It's not just unusual to avoid being attacked by a soul; I've never seen a vision sitting down. I stay motionless, still not sure what its intentions are. Then again, I don't even know if visions can have intentions in the first place.

When it loses interest in my weapon, it looks back at my face.

Now that I think about it… this vision was also previously watching its own decomposing body in the same way. I don't know if that's an anomalous behavior or not, but I've never seen it before.

I can't stay here all day… I haven't checked my watch, but while I know six hours haven't passed, I'd like to return to the pillar with plenty of time for the transport. Ah… what I really want is to get away from this cave as quickly as possible.

So I move forward and start climbing the stairs.

At my first step, the vision straightens,

as if debating whether to stop me. But on my second step, it simply rises and walks back toward the reception…

What was all that? It doesn't matter anymore; it's the investigation squad's problem once I file my report. Now I just… climb the stairs, turn the corner, and head back down the hall…

Ah, there's the light of the exit ahead. Just a bit further and… here, at the boundary between earth and concrete, I place the beacon and activate it. This light, powered by a special battery with characteristics I don't fully understand, is said to last at least a thousand years. I wonder if that's really true.

The communicator light changes from red to blue.

"Aria to Otzar, Aria to Otzar."

"What happened, Aria? Did you find anything interesting?"

"Well… sort of…"

"You sound excited."

"Hehehe, I'll include all the details in my report."

"So I should assume you did find something worth recording?"

"Tell them to prepare an investigation team, along with a liberation crew."

"Liberation… so there are a lot of visions."

"Yes, far too many."

"Congratulations, Aria. You found what you were looking for. Are you going to name the cave, or should the next team do it?"

"Of course, I'll name it."

"What will it be called?"

"It'll be… 'Aria #1.'"

"…"

"Otzar?"

"Understood. Return to the pillar and wait patiently. Don't fall asleep, and don't forget your helmet again."

"Don't say 'again' like it's a regular thing. That only happened once, and—"

Ah, she cut me off.

…

That… was a little over a month ago. As expected, it was a major discovery. Subsequent investigations confirmed that the site had been used as a shelter during the Separation, which backs up the theory that something had warned humanity that a danger of biblical proportions was approaching. A threat that couldn't be stopped with weapons alone. Something… that people could only pray or hope to withstand.

I earned a lot of money, the cave was named after me, and now here I am, standing on the deck of a massive cruiser, traveling to Olvej to visit my parents. They've probably already heard the news and are waiting for me.

They didn't tell me what was on the acrylic plate I found; I imagine… no, it

doesn't matter. It's no longer my concern, and I won't uncover it no matter how hard I try.

"…"

The midday sky is so gray, and in turn, the water below mirrors its dull hue. The perpetual mist on the horizon is equally gray, and only the reflection of my hair brings a touch of color to the view my steely eyes take in as I lower my gaze. I always wonder… will things change in my generation, or in the next?

Change… I don't know if I actually want it to change or if it's just that I long to know more. To understand more about the visions, to find out if I can help them somehow. I haven't been able to stop thinking about that one that was waiting for me on the stairs. Was it trying to speak to me? Was it a futile attempt to communicate? What set that vision apart from all the others?

"So many, many things we don't know…"

I brush aside that annoying lock of hair once more…

"Yes… I think this is a special occasion. I can't go see my parents with these braids. Besides, now I'm wealthy, I can buy all the hair products I want."

Yes, now I'm rich. But does that mean I'm going to quit my job as an explorer?

Not in the slightest.

Dec. 21, 2021, 2:56 p.m. 1 comments

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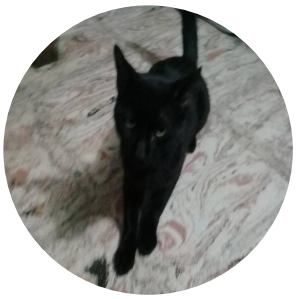

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